

Think Big for Your Family

Meet parents whose passion for the planet inspired them to change the way they're living life and raising their kids.



"We moved halfway around the world so our son could learn how to save it."

By Jessica Ciencin Henriquez
Bali, Indonesia

MY SON, NOAH, was born in New York City seven years ago and has been separating plastic, cardboard, and compost since he was tiny. But it wasn't until last year that we decided to truly do our part for the planet.

In 2014, on vacation in Indonesia, my partner and I came across Green School Bali, which focuses on teaching sustainability. We were inspired. Years later, as we read more and more dismaying news about the

climate crisis, we felt it was time to act. Could we move to Bali? Yes, we decided, we could. It was the most hippie thing we'd ever done, but we vowed as a family to dedicate a year to Green School and decide what to do from there. We hoped that the knowledge we gained about caring for Mother Earth would change our whole family's behavior.

At the school, food is served on banana leaves. Dry-erase boards are fashioned from old car windshields. But the

school's surroundings are anything but idyllic. When we got to Bali, we smelled smoke everywhere: All over the island, people burn plastic trash because there's nowhere else for it to go. We learned that Bali is in crisis, producing 1.6 million tons of trash each year—far more than the island can fit into landfills. A lot gets dumped into the ocean and then washes ashore, clogging Bali's beaches with garbage by the ton. America's waste problems aren't as visible, but even in the U.S. there is no such thing as "throwing it out." Whatever we toss goes into a landfill or the ocean. Our only response is to reduce waste. (Humans produce, on average, 2.2 billion tons per year.)

We stopped buying groceries packaged in plastic and brought glass containers to the store to refill with rice, pasta, sugar, flour, and detergent. (Shampoo and conditioner bars have changed my life too!) We make our own toothpaste, buy secondhand clothes, and borrow things like corkscrews and phone chargers.

Our little family has made big changes because we've seen firsthand that tons of trash add up to more waste than our world can handle. It took traveling across the globe to learn that truly helping the planet starts with what you do at home.



"I went vegan."

Brigitte Gemme
Vancouver, B.C.

I'VE ALWAYS BEEN a good eco-citizen: I bike as much as I can, and my family, even the kids, recycles religiously. But six years ago, when my oldest was a toddler, I read about the impact our eating habits have on the planet and realized we needed to change. Animals raised for food produce tons of methane, a greenhouse gas. On average, Americans and Canadians eat 200-plus pounds of meat per year. At that scale, there's no way to do it sustainably. I knew I had to cut back drastically.

That was big! I'm French, so meat and cheese are part of my culture. But I thought, "I gotta take one for the team."

It turned out I loved being vegan. At first, I was vegan at home, vegetarian when going out, and happy to eat anything served to us in someone's home. My husband loved the food, ➔

and our kids weren't bothered. Our oldest was just 18 months then, so it's what they've always known. (They are now 8 and 4.)

The first vegan cookbook I read was *Isa Does It*, by Isa Chandra Moskowitz. She taught me what I needed to know to make great family meals. My husband didn't notice for a few weeks that he'd essentially become vegan at home. He didn't feel deprived by the pasta dishes, chilis, and stir-fries I was cooking. I wasn't trying to trick anyone; I just wanted to prove that we could do this deliciously. It worked.

Eventually, I went totally vegan, while my husband and kids still eat animal products on occasion. Many in our extended family also eat more plant-based dishes as a result. I take that as a win! What the planet needs is more "imperfect vegans."

Among our favorite dishes: a Bolognese-style spaghetti sauce (I use roasted tofu crumbs for a satisfying texture) and Indian-inspired red lentil soup. On Saturday mornings, my "whole-everything pancakes" are always a hit—they're made with oats, pumpkin seeds, and lots of dark-chocolate chips.

Being vegan is far easier than I thought it would be. My number-one tip is to set some simple rules to start, like "Vegan after 6 P.M." or "Meatless weekends," and grow from there. Making decisions ahead of time means it's more likely you'll stick to your plan when you're hungry.

—As told to Katie Arnold-Ratliff



A PLACE TO START

Scan this code with your phone's camera to learn how to reduce your plastic consumption (no app needed).



This adventurous family is doing its part (and then some).

"We downsized our home—and radically changed our habits."

By Leslie Hsu Oh
Truckee, CA

BACK IN DELAWARE, where we had a 5,873-square-foot house, our four kids each had their own room. They had a playroom in the basement overflowing with toys. My husband had a gym down there too. We had a three-car garage full of stuff we were "storing" (read: things we never looked at or thought about).

Then we moved to Lake Tahoe Basin, the mountainous region on the California-Nevada border, to help one of our kids pursue her dream of becoming an Olympic snowboarder. We saw a chance to embrace a greener lifestyle—and a smaller one. In August we bought a 1,904-square-foot house, where our three girls—now 14, 6, and 3—share a room and our boy, 11, has his own. We got rid of four bookcases out of the seven we had, so you can guess how many books we donated.

In the years before the move, we'd made an effort to teach our kids about climate change. When we lived in Alaska before moving to Delaware, and when we visited Iceland on vacation, we witnessed it firsthand. We'd seen many national parks, where our kids would fill bags of trash to earn Junior Ranger badges. We'd fed and petted sharks to acquaint

ourselves with just one species at risk of extinction. And before we moved to California, we went to its Aquarium of the Pacific, in Long Beach. Reports estimate that 1 million species may go extinct within decades. I wanted my kids to see some of them, to understand that these were just a few of the beings our actions will affect. They got it.

They didn't balk when, along with the cross-country move and the sacrifice that came with it, we all committed to being diligent about recycling, turning off lights, taking shorter showers, and using reusable utensils and water bottles. We have a friend who's downsized all the way to living on a 48-foot catamaran; who were we to keep a big house we didn't need?

We lived for eight months in rentals without our possessions, waiting until we found a permanent home before retrieving them. And we learned that there's nothing like being without your stuff to make you realize how little you need. When our things finally arrived at the new house, we junked two truckloads and haven't replaced a bit. Once you let go, it's freeing—and it feels almost as good as knowing you're doing your part.

“We bike everywhere.”

By Naomi Tomky
Seattle, WA

ALL OF MY ADULT LIFE, I’ve tried to maintain a lifestyle that didn’t force me to depend on cars, but the birth of my second child made me feel as though I were doomed to drive. I had nightmares about minivans. My family had one car, but I balked at buying a second. Then one day I watched several carless parents drop their kids at the elementary school without breaking a sweat, and I realized they were riding e-bikes, as in electric. I knew I needed one.

A motor that kicks in when I pedal turns Seattle’s tall hills into a leisurely cruise. Thanks to lots of storage pockets on either side of the chassis, carrying two toddlers and all their accoutrements is no harder than loading it all into a car—and a whole lot more enjoyable. In



our city’s horrific traffic, biking is often faster than driving, and I’m far more willing to brave the crowds at events (or even the local kiddie pool) without having to find parking within toddling distance.

I chose my bike, the Tern GSD, because it fit two kids in tandem seats on a standard-length bike—no contraptions being pushed in front or pulled behind me, which felt unstable when I test-rode. The biggest downside was the price: about \$5,000. Expensive for a bike, yes,

but far cheaper than a car and an utter bargain for my sanity.

My kids squeal as we go over speed bumps, and I always sport a giant grin at red lights. I know a bike looks silly loaded down with two bobbleheading kids in helmets (and often rain ponchos), plus enormous saddlebags filled with groceries and a stroller. But when I get the green light and begin to move my nonminivan, with the electric assist helping me pedal 400 pounds of people and stuff up the hill to my house, it doesn’t feel silly; it feels brilliant.

The only struggle has been the judgment I’ve gotten from other parents, often delivered in passive-aggressive fashion: “That’s so great, but I could never do it because I would worry too much about little Boo-Boo’s safety.” I care about my kids’ safety, too (reflective tape everywhere!)—and I also care about the state of the world they’ll live in.

This family of eight produces only half a kitchen-size bag of trash a week.



“We went zero waste.”

Debra Wallace
Rochester, NY

IT STARTED five years ago, on Documentary Night, which our family enjoys each Friday. (Back then it was us and our four kids, but now we have six, ages 1 to 15.) We chose an episode of *Morgan Spurlock Inside Man* called “United

States of Trash,” about the zero-waste movement. It was like a conversion experience. We suddenly realized we were consuming so much.

Almost immediately, we vowed as a family to make some serious changes. Through trial and error, we

learned that the best way to go zero waste is to pick one thing to tweak, wait until that change sticks, then add something else. First, we started composting. Then we tackled the disposable-diaper situation, switching to cloth. We now prefer them! And once we’d gotten used to that idea, switching from toilet paper to reusable fabric wipes that take the place of TP seemed like a no-brainer. (Yes, I know how that sounds. I swear it’s not as gross as you think! We have a clip-on bidet to wash with first.) We switched to local meat,

dairy, and eggs. We planted a garden, which was a significant shift, and now one of my kids’ favorite things to do is go outside and pick their own snacks. Slowly, over the years, we made big changes and small, easy ones too: I switched to a metal razor and bought reusable menstrual products. We looked at everything in our home, and if there was a way to replace something with a reusable version, in most cases we did. We’re down to about half a kitchen-size bag of trash per week.

Are we perfect? No. I have six kids! I give myself room to get it mostly right. Also, my husband loves chips, and I can’t make Doritos from scratch. But that’s fine. We don’t need everyone doing zero waste perfectly—we just need everyone trying to do the best they can.

—As told to K.A.R.

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